

The Time To Come

by William H. Todd, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church, Dalton, Ga.

Advent is that season of the Christian calendar in which we give special emphasis to the themes of expectancy and hope, remembering the constancy of God's promises and the sovereignty of his purposes. And in one way or another these are related to and understood as part of his work of salvation, his redeeming of his people through Jesus Christ his Son.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to carry these themes beyond "wordiness," a mere recitation of the words themselves. Thus we often write or speak at length about the "hope," "joy," "expectancy" of the "saving event," without working out how such themes touch and give meaning to the "everydayness" of our lives or to our understanding of the shape of the world in which we live. Yet, if Advent has meaning for us—which we believe it does—then it will not only give us reason to think and speak of "hope" and "expectancy" and the "purposes of God," but also a means of relating these themes to our understanding of history, the world and ourselves in a period of growing nuclear danger. More than that, in some way Advent must go beyond speaking only to the overall scheme of things—the pattern of human history, the beginning and end of life. It will also speak to the in-between times, for these themes and this season must surely have meaning for us not only on a cosmic scale but also for a man or a woman on an ordinary Wednesday afternoon.

This last phrase is not original with me, but comes from a contemporary southern novelist, Walker Percy, who is an acute observer of the folly of contemporary humanity, yet whose observations and questions about life are often questions and observations of faith. Because it seems to me that novelists like Percy and others raise pertinent questions and give valuable insights into the human enterprise, I want to consider the themes of Advent in the light of two recent novels: Morris West's *The Clowns of God* and Walker Percy's *The Second Coming*. Neither is a "religious" book, as such. Yet in each, the author demonstrates an acute perception of the theological questions that the world raises for the church and for faith. Hopefully, from the perspective of these two works, we may gain some thoughts (and maybe a few illustrations) for preaching and teaching during Advent.

Morris West is a prolific writer who has dealt with the Roman Catholic Church in at least two previous works, *The Devil's Advocate* and *The Shoes of the Fisherman*. His latest novel, *The Clowns of God* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1981; paperback edition: Bantam Books, 1982) is a story of a Pope, Gregory XVII., who has had what he believes to be a special revelation from God of the end of all things. His vision is of an end that is both devastating and frightening. It is an end that leaves the world a wasteland because it comes through a nuclear holocaust. His vision convinces him that he must tell the world what he has been shown in order to stop what seems to be the im-

pending nuclear disaster that will fulfill his vision. His vision of the second coming, the parousia, is not one of hope or anticipation, but of destruction that will be brought about, it is implied, by human hands. One wonders how consistent this image of the Second Advent is with the "hope" and "joyful expectancy" that we find in the First Advent and which continues to give us hope for life and faith in God. Often we are confronted with contemporary religious analyses of God's attitude toward or relationship with the world which emphasize only such judgment that is destructive and which, therefore, seem inconsistent with the revelation of his saving purposes in Jesus Christ.

As a result of his vision, the Pope decides to send an encyclical to the church telling what has been revealed to him by God and warning the church and the world of the disaster that lies ahead. He hopes that this will cause world opinion to be marshalled against the danger of nuclear disaster and thus influence world leaders to change the dangerous course that they are now pursuing. The Roman Curia refuses to allow him to send the encyclical because they believe that it will bring the church widespread discredit on the part of many people while creating panic in other quarters. Thus they give him a choice of either being declared insane or resigning quietly, saying nothing of his vision and assuming vows of obedience to a monastic life. He chooses the latter, but not before sending a secret letter to an old friend, Carl Mendelius, the eminent Professor of Biblical and Patristic Studies at the German University of Tübingen. The first part of the novel concerns Mendelius' efforts to assess and then tell the world Pope Gregory's story. It ends with Mendelius being seriously injured by a terrorist letter bomb. The second part of the novel is a story of Pope Gregory, now Jean Marie Barette, as he leaves his monastery and is involved in efforts to communicate directly with world leaders to convince them to stop the impending nuclear holocaust. When he fails at this, he undertakes to communicate with the people of the world through a series of letters written to God by a character whom he calls Johnny the Clown.

The Clowns of God is a novel that is clouded by a genuine despair about the state of the world. East and west edge threateningly closer to nuclear confrontation. World leaders speak of the inevitable as only a matter of time. The young feel that the future can only be dark and often are on the edge of both despair and rebellion. It is obvious that the author is not only spinning a good story but that he is expressing his own feelings about the danger that the future seems to hold.

This book is a helpful reminder to us who engage to preach about hope. We may feel that hope and we may feel a certain security that derives from it. But much of the anxiety that others in the world feel about the future is expressed in West's novel and in particular in the words of Professor Mendelius' daughter, Katrin, who says to her father: "The thing is, I am afraid."

"Of what?"

"Of always . . . just that. Of getting married and having children and trying to make a home while the whole world could tumble round our ears in a day."

Suddenly she was passionate and eloquent. "You older ones don't understand. You've survived a war. You've built things. You've had us; we're

grown up. But look at the world you've left us! All along the borders there are rocket launchers and missile silos. The oil's running out so we're using atom power and burying the waste that will one day will poison our children You've given us everything except tomorrow!" (pp. 33-34)

Not long after his conversation with his daughter, Mendelius and his wife journey to Rome where he intends to deliver some lectures and to see his old friend, Pope Gregory, who is now living in a monastery. In his lectures to a group of pastors, the question about the future and what it holds comes up. Some are very fearful and uncertain, wondering how they will respond if there is nuclear disaster and how they can care for their neighbors if the world is reduced to a rubble yet they are still alive. Mendelius captures their feelings when he says to them: "When the black night comes down, in the great desert, when there is neither pillar of cloud nor spark of fire to light the path, when the voice of authority is stilled, and we hear nothing but the confusion of old argument, when God seems to absent himself from his own universe, where do we turn? Whom can we sanely believe?" (p. 100).

Mendelius' questions, to which no one supplies the answer, is very reminiscent of the questions and musings of the writer of Ecclesiastes who wondered about the presence and absence of God. We may know such questions and even believe this to be the state of the world. But the recurring presence of Advent on our calendars is a continuing reminder that in the Christ-event God has given us a sign of hope that can carry us through even such dark nights as that.

The subject of the value of signs and symbols in the church comes up in the book in a conversation between Mendelius and Cardinal Drexel, a high member of the Roman Curia to whom he talks before he goes to visit the former Pope. They speak of the faith that is needed for action and the desire of many to be undergirded by such visible signs to assure them that all is well. Drexel says to Mendelius:

"In ancient days when the world was full of mystery, it was easy to be a believer—in the spirits who haunted the grove, in the god who cast the thunderbolts. In this age we are all conditioned to the visual illusion. What you see is what exists. Remove the visible symbols of an established organization—the cathedrals, the parish church, the bishop of his miter—and the Christian assembly, for many, ceases to exist There is no place anymore for wandering saints Most people prefer a simple religion. You make your offering in the temple and carry away salvation in a package." (p. 123)

After meeting with his friend, the former Pope, Mendelius with the help of a journalist publishes a story of Pope Gregory's abdication and of his vision. He is almost killed by a letter bomb sent by a terrorist in hopes that this will touch off rioting in the German University among students who are already fearful that war is imminent. As a result of the attack on his friend, the Pope, now Jean Marie Barette, decides to leave the monastery and undertake on his own to convince world leaders of the folly that they are pursuing. As he is about to leave Rome, he has one last conversation with Cardinal Drexel who

asks him what he expects at this stage of his life. Jean Marie replies: "Enough light to see a divine sense in this mad world. Enough faith to follow the light." (p. 204) Is this not the light and the faith that we seek during Advent?

After visiting Mendelius' family in Germany and calming the passions of the students, he goes to his native France. One afternoon while he is walking in a garden near a country inn, he encounters a group of retarded children who are cared for by a woman at a special institute. The children have been called "les petites bouffennes du bon Dieu . . . 'God's little clowns.'" Thus, the book's title seems to ask if we are not all God's clowns who are in some way to be pitied for the condition of our world.

When he is unable to convince world leaders to listen to him, Jean Marie decides to influence world opinion by writing and publishing a series of letters to God from Johnny the Clown. He calls them *Last Letters from a Small Planet*. In his letters he pleads with God to tell him why the world is in such a state. In his letters to God, Johnny the Clown tries to express the feelings of the people of the world about what's gone wrong.

They want to know what's gone wrong with Your world . . . and why they don't see You sometimes on the street corner where Your Son used to be centuries ago, talking to the passersby, telling the truth in fairy tales. What can I tell them? I'm just Johnny the Clown! . . . Will you think about all these things and try to give me some kind of answer? I know we've talked often. Sometimes I've understood. Sometimes I haven't. But right now I'm scared and I'm tripping over my big boots to run and hide. (p. 296)

In another letter he writes:

When a man becomes a clown he makes a free gift of himself to the audience. To endow them with the saving grace of laughter, he submits to be mocked, drenched, clouted, crossed in love. Your Son made the same submission when He was crowned as a mock king, and the troops spat wine and water in His face. (p. 316)

The book ends with more questions than answers. Christ does appear in the novel, gathering the faithful few from different parts of the world (and different parts of the novel) in a mountain retreat in Austria. Jean Marie pleads with him for some kind of delay of the holocaust and it is granted. But the overall impression that comes from the book is that the inevitable cannot be changed and that God has no intention of doing so. Thus it is not a hopeful book, either from the standpoint of the will of world leaders to change things or from the perspective of the intentions of God.

In many ways I think this book is valuable because it asks questions of us which make us honest in dealing with such things as hope and faith. But on the other hand the hope to which we cling, and the faith which is found in the coming of Christ and in the power of God which is demonstrated there is not consistently portrayed in the characters of the book or in the perspective of its author. It is obvious that West is more driven by fear and despair than by any hope that Advent has to offer, whether it is the first or second Advent.

Walker Percy is a southern novelist whose books examine in various ways the malaise that often afflicts contemporary human beings. With a wry humor and sharp insights, he holds up a mirror that shows us ourselves from angles we might not quickly appreciate. At the same time he pokes at us, prodding us to be a little bit more honest about the poses and postures that we assume and the conditions under which we have gotten ourselves. *The Second Coming* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980) brings back a character out of another Percy novel, *The Last Gentleman*. Will Barrett is now successful, wealthy, and a widower, who lives in Linwood, North Carolina and plays an excellent game of golf, but who suddenly begins to fall down in the most unusual places, such as sandtraps. He doesn't know why. But such incidents cause him to think about his life, what it has been up to this point and what it holds for him. The result is that he finds that it holds nothing and he begins to contemplate suicide.

The other major character of the book is Allison Huger, the daughter of Barrett's old girlfriend, who escapes from the mental sanitarium in Linwood and takes up residence in an old greenhouse, now overrun by the forest, but still offering her the shelter she needs to reconstruct her life after a series of electric shock treatments that have impaired her ability to think coherently, but not her ability to think. Through Allison's simple understanding of words and their meaning and through her inability to clearly express everything she means or to perceive what others are saying, Percy shows us the folly of our ways and of our words. After escaping from the sanitarium, she sits on a bench on the main street and looks at the people who pass by. She begins to read bumper stickers. One reads: "I FOUND IT 'Found what?' she wondered" (p. 22).

A little later, a woman comes up to her passing out religious tracts which she urges Allison to read. The pamphlet asks her if she is lonely, and if she wants to make a new start and if she has even had a personal encounter with Our Lord and Savior? While she is trying to read the woman talks to her, finally inviting her to "a little get together we are having tonight. I have a feeling a person like yourself might get a lot out of it."

(Allison) considered that question. "I'm not sure what you mean by the expression 'a person like yourself.' Does that mean you know what I am like?"

But the woman's eyes were no longer looking directly at her, rather were straying just past her. The smile was still radiant but in it she felt a pressure like the slight but firm pressure of a hostess's hand steering one along a receiving line.

"Won't you come?" said the woman but steering her along with her eyes Her voice was cordial, but the question did not sound like a question and the promise did not sound like a promise. (p. 33)

Therefore Allison, who "made straight A's and flunked ordinary living" (p. 93) goes to the woods in order to find some way of reconstructing her life from the pieces that are left of it.

In this novel, Percy shows us two characters whose lives seem to be going

in opposite directions, yet who meet and find in each other someone who puts the pieces of life back together and redeems life from despair. Will Barrett has everything going for him. He is wealthy, well-liked, an excellent golfer, who has all of the benefits of worldly favor. But he has reached a point of despair about life in which he contemplates suicide because of the farcical nature of things. As a result, he reaches a state of "madness," not as the world would define it, but madness all the same. And he descends into a cave to wait some sign from God about what is to happen.

Allison Huger is certifiably mentally ill by all the standards of the world, but she is attempting to put her life back together after the electric shock treatments which have been ordered to restore her sanity but which have really rearranged her thinking processes. She slowly gathers together the threads of her life, and in the simple observations of the world and the people she encounters there, of the forest and of the greenhouse and the plants, in undertaking simple tasks such as moving a stove from one place to another, having a fire, finding a place to sleep, caring for a dog whose faithfulness to her is something she has not known before, her life begins to have meaning and hope.

Will Barrett and Allison Huger meet in the woods near the greenhouse when he slices a ball out of bounds, goes and searches for it and begins to think of the time long ago when he and his father were hunting in the woods of south Georgia. He remembers his father's own suicide and wonders if that is what life really is all about. Although they meet again briefly, it is only after he descends into the cave waiting for God to speak, and becomes nauseated and then dreadfully ill and finds his way out again, falling into her greenhouse, that they begin to cling to one another and find in each other meaning and hope which they had not found anywhere else.

Will has not seen it in all of the religions and religious people in the little town of Linwood, and especially not in his daughter, Leslie, who he describes as "a Christian and the angriest person I know." Allison has not found it in her parents who have little time for her or in the psychiatrist who gives all evidence of trying to help her but who has really torn down the structures of her mind.

In one another, in the genuineness and integrity that they find in each other, in the needs that they have and the ability to love and accept each other, Will and Allison find a different meaning that is not only new but is genuinely redemptive. As a result of the relationship he throws his guns, potential means of his own suicide, over the cliff. As a result of their relationship, she once again can have faith in a human being and, therefore, in herself.

The book does not end with everyone being happy or well, nor does it end with the future being spelled out. And certainly no Percy novel can end with all of the farcical condition which modern humanity has created being accounted for. It does end with our realization that these two human beings have in a very simple way begun to redeem life for one another by providing the simple love and certainty which neither found anywhere else.

In the early stages of the book, Will Barrett muses about whether certain signs that he sees about him are signs of the end of the world. What he finds is not a second coming of the Lord, but a second or new experience of life, not by

all of the means that the world would prescribe for happiness: wealth, success, popularity. But it comes in the simple faith of another human being whose speech patterns would be mystifying to all of his friends, but whose speech patterns he adopts as a way of communicating with her.

Late in the book, Will Barrett muses about life and the stench of death that seems to cover everything. He says:

Everybody has given up. Everybody thinks that there are only two things: war which is a kind of life in death, and peace which is a kind of death in life. But what if there should be a third thing, life? (p. 272)

For Will Barrett and Allison Huger, hope and life are found in one another. The hope is fragile because their lives are fragile. But it is more real and deeper and more significant for them and for their future than anything either of them has known before. It seems to me that Percy is saying to us something about our humanity and the places we find meaning and hope.

He seems to have little tolerance for the grand schemes of organized religions. Several places in the novel he lists churches and beliefs in a way that helps us to realize how the great number of churches and the conflicting beliefs they hold contradict the essential truths they profess. It is obvious that Will Barrett does not find his questions answered by God in the cave, but in the singular affection of a simple human being.

As we prepare for preaching in Advent, perhaps this is a reminder of the humanity of Jesus and of the effect that his particular humaneness had on those who encountered him. Perhaps it is a further reminder that our talk of hope and expectancy and the purposes of God will have theological significance only if they are couched in ways so as to bring us in contact with the humanity of God.